Central and Eastern European Online Library: The Vendors Perspective on Making Digital Library

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Introduction
Whenever you find one of these net-work-graphics displaying multiple communica-tion lines in the digital world, the Internet is always represented as a cloud. All those small machines, which are at least physically touchable in our offices, are connected with each other through a vague and spongy medium, for which the unstable cloud has become the most plausible metaphor.

Libraries, on the other hand, have been considering themselves for centuries as one of the most stable kind of institution, since their main task is to collect and preserve documents. And for centuries there is in fact only one thing endangering this kind of stability – it is the fire, as the common experience of Alexandria and Sarajevo shows.

A cloudy online library therefore seems at the first glance like a contradictio in adjecto, yet its plausibility is not to be found in the preservation, but in the distribution of documents. Making them accessible to a potentially unlimited number of readers can be achieved only via this medium called “the Web”. And, besides preservation, the public accessibility of documents has always been the second main task of libraries.

I have been asked to tell, from the vendor’s point of view, something about our experiences in building up the Central and Eastern European Online Library, a library with an exclusive focus on a niche segment: Humanities Periodicals from Central, Eastern, and SouthEastern Europe.

And since the vendor somehow represents the cloud between the editors and the readers, I will focus my theses on the requests of both of them towards the vendor.

The Editor’s point of view: CEE Editors and the Open Access debate
One of the basic points of departure in the Open Access debate claims, that the documents that contain the results of scholarly work are as a rule pre-financed already in the framework and budget of the research projects from which they
result. And since most of these budgets are of public money, these documents should be accessible in free public space.

This basic thesis for open access, according to our experience, doesn’t fit with the situation neither of the humanities and social sciences scholarly periodicals, nor of their authors from Central and Eastern Europe. Most of the editors can not afford to abandon the right of being paid for their product, both in print and in electronic format. But the need of getting their product paid, forces the usability of the internet as a distribution channel.

The decision about open access is basically an editorial decision and not to be made by a distributor as C.E.E.O.L. is. Therefore, the concept of our library doesn’t include any commitment of the editors regarding this question. If the editor decides to offer the electronic journal for money, then the payment facility of C.E.E.O.L. might be a decisive argument for him / her. Yet the real added value, which we offer through our library, consists in providing additional library features such as catalogue and searchability, abstracts, keywords, author portraits etc.

This is our main task as intermediary between editors and readers.

We would of course appreciate very sincerely any decision of, for instance, the European Commission saying, that all our content produced by thousands of authors and provided by hundreds of editors all over Central Europe is an essential knowledge base for understanding historical, contemporary and future European developments and should therefore be accessible without any limits for everybody. Neither the library of Alexandria nor any other huge storage of documents in history could exist without the awareness of a “good sovereign”, that such a collection would effect a considerable advantage for his state and his governance – either in economics, in politics, in military or any other field.

We, of course, are convinced that C.E.E.O.L. in fact can be described as a contribution to a kind of European Alexandria.

But as long as we miss such a decision made by the European Commission we have to go the subsidiary way and convince the university librarians, that a subscription to C.E.E.O.L. would be a significant added value for their users.

Findings in C.E.E.O.L.

Researchers normally come to a library to look for a particular document they have read about in the footnotes of another document. If we imagine a researcher anywhere in this world working on a topic let’s say in Gender Studies, then a keyword search in C.E.E.O.L. just for “Gender” leads to various sub-keywords as for instance “gender analysis in the Czech republic” or “gender inequalities on the Czech labour market” although the indexed documents are from different periodicals.

That means that each user in spite of searching one particular document has a good chance to find additional documents which are relevant for his or her topic. And this is only one added value provided by the fact, that 176 editors bring their
respective journals to a common portal. There are many other similar advantages which cannot be achieved by 176 individual web-sites.

The Users Point of view:
Public Libraries

If C.E.E.O.L. continues to grow by the actual rate in number of participating journals, we will be able to provide over 200 periodicals at the end of 2005. Simultaneously with the growth in the number of periodicals there is the permanent growth in depth – regarding the number of issues of each periodical offered in C.E.E.O.L. So we will probably achieve the number of 30,000 articles until the end of this year.

Yet the librarians ask – as they are obliged to do, – for stability.

How will a reader in 2050 open a PDF document, which has been created in 2005? Will there in 2075 any CD-ROM reading devices still exist? Wouldn’t it be better to rely on physical means such as the established microfiche? Those are serious questions, but the librarians themselves are aware that we cannot postpone digitizing until we get them definitely answered.

Nevertheless, it is much more difficult to answer a second serious and frequently asked question of the librarians:

How can we make sure that all the periodicals joining C.E.E.O.L. will continue to provide us their future issues?

It is difficult to answer, because such continuity must be achieved in a market process. It can only be the result of the editors’ experience, that C.E.E.O.L. and all the efforts they invest in – namely offering their periodical content over this sustainable platform –, generate more income and also more profit – at least in a mid-term perspective. And these results depend on, how many universities and libraries worldwide decide to subscribe to C.E.E.O.L.

Frankly speaking, this is a kind of logic circle, in which we feel sometimes like in a hamsters’ wheel – but with an optimistic outlook for the near future.

Who – or which library – could say “NO” to a collection of 200 CEE periodicals from the field of Humanities for their NON-VIRTUAL library?

The institutions pay a considerable amount of money for all those print subscriptions, while only a small part of this amount arrives at the editors’ cash-boxes in CEE, the rest being spent for various logistic and administrative purposes.

We are quite sure, that the basic advantage of the C.E.E.O.L. concept is coming true and it is evident, when the universities or the research institutes can get:

• more content
• for less money
• in a much more comfortable way.

And even those institutes which today have a rather low periodical budget should then be able to subscribe to the online library through a convenient subscription model.
Individual users

All our colleagues from companies providing online archives (e.g. from the German daily and weekly newspapers) tell us, that the market for pay-per-view article sales is still at its beginning. All their experiences show that only very rarely the individual users decide to either open a personal user account, or to make an online payment in order to download two or three articles. Market researches have shown, that there is an economic potential in the pay-per-view model. So what are the analysts’ criteria for such an evaluation?

The main criterion is the fact, that each editor in the West is anyway obliged to maintain a digital archive of the journal. This means that the only additional costs would be offering this content online.

In comparison with this situation, at the end of 2004 each of our editor partners received an archive CD with all their articles that had been offered on CEEOL, including the catalogue database, bibliographic details and search facilities.

Most of them enthusiastically commented that they were now in the possession of their own very well organized and consistent archive, because quite often pre-print files older than 2 years had not been archived at all at their editorial offices.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in the last 2 years C.E.E.O.L. has become a library in the sense of collecting and preserving as well, and not only in making accessible all this valuable and unique online content. And we are quite sure, that for anybody looking for an article from the 1994 edition of the Bulgarian journal “Kritika i Humanism” in digital format, C.E.E.O.L. will be one of only very few places in this world where this document can be found.

For our small team, which is building up the Central and Eastern European Online Library, “The Balkans from the Outside” is actually “The Balkans from the In-Side”. And we do not want to miss it.

Thank you for your kind attention.